

The Heart of Practice

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When I was sixteen, I came across two books that set me on the path of Dharma. One was *Beyond the Death of God: the Gospel according to Zen*, and the other *The Dharma Bums*, by Jack Kerouac. After that, my first encounter with Zen practice was with a rather scary hardcore group of older all-male academics, taught on a weekly basis by the wonderful Rev. Hofuku Hughes, from the London Zen Priory. It was conventional Soto Zen teachings and extremely rigorous, and although intellectually it made sense, I as a naïve and idealistic young woman found it very tough.

Since then, a slightly softer (by which I guess I mean a little less cerebral and a bit more holistic and inclusive – think John Daido Looi) version of Zen Dharma practice has underpinned my life, but in the intervening years it's been modulated by aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, various teachers at Sharpham College and the mindfulness teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. It's also been interwoven with archetypal psychology, pagan, Western Mystery Tradition and environmental activist strands.

The last few years, after nearly 30 years of looking, I have finally found my *sangha* in the shape of the Network of Engaged Buddhists, though because of where I live and a number of commitments my involvement remains virtual, except for one retreat a year. Nonetheless, I now feel that at last I can relate to *I take refuge in the sangha*, whereas before that notion remained largely conceptual for me, an intellectual construct that I could understand but not experience.

Periodically I kind of clean out my practice. I've been thinking lately about what core Buddhism looks like if one removes the dressings accumulated by different cultural approaches to Buddhist practice. What is it about Buddhism, at heart, that is so enduring? What is it that Buddhism uniquely has to offer? What does it mean to be engaged? Below, I offer some reflections in a brief revisiting of the hub of our tradition and its practice.

Buddhist philosophy

It's often said about Buddhism that it's easier to define what it's not than what it is. So: Buddhism is not a religion founded in a 'revealed' godhead; does not postulate the existence of God; nor present a set of beliefs to be espoused by followers.

Although it may have spiritual implications, it does not in itself offer teachings in metaphysics (these tend to be cultural accretions). It does not incorporate a spiritual hierarchy to mediate the teachings; rather it suggests that each of us find our way ourselves – though 'if you want to know the way up the mountain, ask the traveller who journeys it every day'.

It is about waking up both to the intrinsic transience of everything, and to the realisation of interconnectedness; to the fact that every thought, word and deed of ours has consequences not only for ourselves but for others too, and that we have choices.

Unlike most religious doctrines, Buddhism does not suggest that Nirvana is at an impossibly far distance in time/space to be attained only by a very few chosen ones; rather, the 'waking up' of enlightenment is, in theory, available to each of us in every moment – given sufficient understanding, effort and practice.

It is less interested in spiritual hypotheses than it is in direct perception of reality and dissolution of illusion. The solutions to our problems, and therefore to the world's, are within ourselves.

Key concepts in Buddhist thought are free enquiry, self-reliance, mental discipline, tolerance, interconnectedness, and loving compassion.

Buddhist practice

The Buddha taught that everything in the world is impermanent, and that it is our failure to understand the true nature of life on earth, and our wish for it to be different, that lead to much of our unhappiness, suffering and trouble.

Conversely, our freedom is directly connected with our ability to make peace with this fact, and to stop pursuing what Ken Jones calls ‘our unwinnable lawsuit against reality’.

The Buddha formulated the Four Noble Truths to convey this:

1. Life involves suffering
2. Suffering is caused by attachment to desires (craving), or aversion
3. There is a way out of suffering
4. The path of liberation from suffering is the Eightfold Path (see below)

Buddhism relies on understanding, rather than faith. The Buddha enjoined people to try out his teachings rather than taking his word for it. Great emphasis is put on the practical aspect, because it is only through practice that one can attain a higher level of evolution of consciousness and finally reach Nirvana – which really means cessation: the cessation of craving, aggression and ignorance; the cessation of the struggle to survive, to prove our existence to the world.

Buddhism is tolerant of all faiths, even when it may challenge the way these operate. It recognises the importance of core ethical teachings common to many paths, and while it emphasises the need for clarity and discernment in ‘right understanding’, it’s essentially pluralist.

The basic exposition of the Buddha’s recommendations can be summarised in the five precepts:

- 1 Not to harm, or take the life of, anything living
- 2 Not to take anything not freely given
- 3 To abstain from sexual misconduct and sensual overindulgence
- 4 To refrain from untrue speech
- 5 To avoid intoxication (in other words, losing mindfulness).

Buddhism and politics

It’s worth remembering that the Buddha was an activist and social reformer, and Buddhism is a radical socio-political movement for change as much as, or more than, a route to personal salvation founded in a metaphysical doctrine. Buddhism has naturally been coloured by the countries, peoples and cultures through which it has passed in its long history, accruing many spiritual overlays, but the teachings beneath the variants are the same and are remarkably simple and effective, if difficult to put into practice on a minute-by-minute basis (which the Buddha suggested is the core practice for enlightenment).

What differentiates engaged Buddhism from some other social reform policies is its strong ethical foundation (offered as a set of recommendations rather than commandments), rooted in the notion of interconnectedness, and the practice of *ahimsa* (non-harming), and loving-kindness. We have a responsibility to our co-habitants in this universe, and wisdom consists in knowing that what we do to others we also do to ourselves.

We could further define these as suggestions to:

- Lead a moral life
- Bring mindful awareness to our thoughts, words and actions
- Develop wisdom, understanding and compassion.

Buddhist psychology and mindfulness

Because Buddhism goes back so far – 2500 years – and because its teachings are ostensibly simple, it’s easy to overlook the fact that what it offers is an advanced system of personal and social transformation that can be applied on many levels.

Buddhism suggests that by looking within we can profoundly affect our relationship with the universe. One way in which this manifests is in being aware of our impact in every situation and every moment; and in monitoring our habitual reflexive responses to self, others and the world, becoming aware of our intentions and motivations, and choosing how we then act.

The notion of karma is deeply associated with Buddhism, and widely misinterpreted. Very simply, karma represents an understanding that everything, from the subtlest thought to the grossest deed, has a consequence. Knowing that, we bring awareness and rigorous self-examination to our way of being in the world. This is key to the notion of ‘right relationship’.

In relation to the generation of karmic effects, it’s useful to look at:

- Motivation, or the intention behind an action
- The effects of the action on oneself

- The effects on another or others.

To this extent, Buddhism has profound psychological implications, and ‘knowing oneself’ is a core injunction behind many spiritual traditions; one which Buddhism emphasises. This means subjecting one’s life to unending scrutiny. For me, it means that *all* of my life is ‘practice’, not just the time when I’m sitting on my meditation cushion (or at least, that’s the theory!).

Engaged Buddhism

From the view of engaged Buddhism, personal enlightenment and engagement in the world are not mutually exclusive: rather quite the opposite. The route to enlightenment does not, in this view, occur in solitary attention to personal salvation (which can be essentially egotistical and narcissistic) but through the active practise of wisdom and compassion – ‘right relationship’ – in all the aspects of our lives.

In fact, the opportunity for evolution of consciousness is, in this view, more immediate and profound in our active engagement with the world rather than in our retirement from it. It is in our interrelatedness in action in which we can most clearly see the areas that need attention (if we are willing to do that), whether within ourselves and our perceptions or in the world around us (if there is a difference).

Engaged Buddhism is not a quietist path, but an activist one.

This will mean, at times, being willing to challenge the established order and stand up against practices that are clearly not for the good of all (and a willingness to examine our certainties, side-by-side with that). For engaged Buddhists, this means putting the welfare of others (human and non-human – as the Bodhisattva Vow is to ‘save all sentient beings’ – and the planet/universe) at the top of the agenda, and being willing to go out on a limb to confront injustice, harm, cruelty and oppression in any manifestation, in any non-violent way necessary, even if to do so challenges our comfort levels (as it invariably will). The intention to actively seek to cause no harm also means not to be complicit in or collusive with others’ harmful actions – what Christianity calls the sin of omission.

For some, this will mean writing letters and emails, making phone calls, organising or signing petitions, raising awareness. For others, it will mean making a more physically active difference in the world through humanitarian work abroad, or with the homeless, disadvantaged or substance abusers. For others again it will mean espousing and exposing human or animal rights’ issues; protesting against the arms’ race; or attending and organising anti-war or climate demos and camps.

An engaged Buddhist attempts to be mindful and active in relation to all their interactions with the world in the light of these teachings.

The Eightfold Path

Always, one is – in theory – checking one’s motivations against the Eightfold Path, and bringing into the light of awareness the ignorance in oneself, as well as challenging that perceived in the outer world.

The Eightfold Path is:

1. Right View, or Understanding
2. Right Intention, or Relationship
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort, or Discipline
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration.